

Demystifying the Cowboy Through His Song:  
How Cowboy Poetry and Music Create a Common Language Between Multiple-Use  
Conservationists and Forever-Wild Preservationists to Meet the Goals of Sustainable  
Agriculture

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Abstract:

Though multiple-use conservationists (use the land for multiple purposes) and forever-wild preservationists (solely set aside land for non-human species) seem to be at odds, this article argues that key figures such as Gifford Pinchot and John Muir discredit this perceived discordance. As well, it probes into the unexplored arena of cowboy music gatherings as productive places for cooperation between the two groups. First, mystique of the cowboy is examined and unraveled through true stories of cowboy-environmentalist collaboration. The article addresses how cowboy poetry festivals function as entertainment and meeting places to support sustainable behavior through community-based social marketing techniques.

Key words: future projections, indicators of sustainability, cowboy poetry, environmental, economic, social, and philosophical aspects of sustainable agriculture

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## Introduction

The ranching lifestyle is known best through its pop culture filter: the Western film and novel. *True Grit*, *The Virginian*, *Oklahoma!*, *The Lone Ranger*, even children's films like *Rango*, paint a picture of the cowboy that creates a certain sense of the West. The imagined cowboy, steady and quiet on his horse, looks out on the great mountains and plains, conquering the landscape with his gaze and lasso, becoming a force of nature himself. Simultaneously, the cattle rancher, in popular documentaries such as *Food, Inc.* and *Super Size Me!* has been conflated with the red meat industry. Both types of films have created a widely accepted mythology of the cowboy. They captivate the popular imagination and mystify the West in much the same way Horace Greely and James K. Polk made gold hunting seem like a sport rather than the arduous pioneering it actually was. This paper seeks to demystify the current understanding of the small rancher or cowboy through examining historical collaborations between multiple-use planners and purist preservationists, case studies from small ranches, and cowboy art. It explores the possibility of finding an effective, common language and understanding between environmentalists and cattle ranchers through cowboy poetry and music. This will hopefully promote the idea that sustainable ranch practices are economically viable, socially normal, and environmentally stable, so that traditional multiple-use conservationists (especially cowboys) will follow suit and forever-wild preservationists will find a common ground with those multiple-use land owners.

## The Need for A Common Language

Why is demystifying the cowboy image important? There are few careers that are as attached to the land as that of the cattle rancher and the farmer, also known as the cowboy. Unfortunately, there is also a common misconception that most cowboys see themselves as conquerors of the land (Tompkins 1992). In reality, however, the majority of ranchers themselves as adaptable *stewards* of the land

(Koerner 2007, 14). As nature writer and female rancher, Gretel Ehrlich, wrote in her narrative, *The Solace of Open Spaces*, “[A rancher's] part of the beef-raising industry is to birth and nurture calves and take care of their mothers. For the most part...he sees and comes to know more animals than people...Ranchers are midwives, hunters, nurturers, providers, and conservationists all at once” (1985). Even John Muir was a rancher, one who sought to create a common language between ranchers, conservationists, hunters, and environmentalists (Kerasote 2005). Creating a common language is a key component to meeting the goals of sustainable agriculturalists; in particular: “environmental health, economic profitability, and social responsibility. Engaging in environmental stewardship, cultivating more profitable industries, and encouraging stable, prosperous families and communities are the core principles of sustainable agriculture” (McGinty 2009). It is these objectives—especially the desire to build prosperous communities—that are at the heart of sustainable agriculture and cowboy poetry.

Through understanding how common languages have worked in the past, contemporary conservationists and preservationists can discover more ways to build a common language to work toward these goals with a greater base of support. In the article “The Unexpected Environmentalist: Building a Centrist Coalition,” Ted Kerasote gives a historical framework for a common language. He recounts how Gifford Pinchot, America's leading forester, John Muir, and Theodore Roosevelt, despite their differences, were in conversation with one another throughout their careers. For example, Kerasote tracks a particular exchange between Muir and Pinchot regarding the overgrazing of sheep in Yosemite. Muir called sheep “hoofed locusts,” harping on Pinchot to change his opinion that “sheep did little harm” to the beautiful landscapes they both sought to preserve (Kerasote 2005). Kerasote notes that they finally came to an agreement because they both had “a love of nature.” He traces how Pinchot listened to Muir, and took an approach that current environmental writers might call, “range management” or “proper land-use planning.” Instead of removing the sheep entirely, Pinchot wrote, as quoted by Kerasote, “When 'young trees are old enough...grazing may begin again.' For Pinchot,

protection on one hand, use on the other, was the ultimate win-win solution: the resource could be sustainably harvested, commercial interests could be served, and the greatest good for the greatest number could be achieved” (2005, 72). Unfortunately, the current trend seems to pit Muir's and Pinchot's followers against one another rather than seeking to achieve common goals with “multiple-use conservationists on one side of the divide and forever-wild preservationists on the other” (Kerasote 2005, 72). Groups such as the Sierra Club and the National Cattlemen's Beef Association would experience long-term success in their respective missions if they worked in concert rather than discord with one another to achieve common goals. Fortunately, examples abound where ranchers and environmentalists achieve harmony. These successes can serve as a baseline for others who wish to do the same.

This desired harmony begins with research on how to present information to different groups. University of California Berkeley's Shasta Ferranto, Lynn Huntsinger, and their colleagues researched how to successfully reach out to ranchers and farm owners as a way to stimulate those conversations. In their article, “Consider the source: The impact of media and authority in outreach to private forest and rangeland owners,” the team sought to identify gaps in “information distribution and content” (Ferranto et. al. 2012, 1). They found that sustainable land management marketers often target large ranches with the intention to affect more space. However, the researchers conclude that “As ownerships become increasingly fragmented, outreach focus and methods will need to shift to more effectively target the owners of smaller properties” (2012). This may be more costly as their messages would need to be designed for specific regions and populations, but could yield more localized and energized support for environmental initiatives on farms. Some of these conversations have been instigated in rural communities near research universities, for example, and have proven to be productive methods of communication.

In a 2007 article from *Utah State* magazine entitled “The New West,” a “detached-from-the-

land suburbanite,” Roger Lang, and three Utah State University (USU) graduates who grew up in the ranching tradition discussed how working with the natural ecosystem's rhythms rather than against them made Sun Ranch more successful (Koerner 2007); a method they obtained from their work at the university. One of USU's ranch management program's alumni, James Stuart (not to be confused with the famous actor that performed in cowboy roles in the 50s and 60s), explained, “we're mimicking the bison...Better to graze 365 cows a days in one spot than one cow for 365 days. A cow you can buy and sell in a day. If you overgraze, it takes 10 to 50 years to fix the damage. Continuous grazing is not good; high intensity, low frequency is” (Koerner 2007, 15). Sun Ranch also heeds the wildlife in several ways. For example, they graze their cattle to preserve the integrity of top soil and only kill predators when they must as they recognize these animals maintain a balanced ecosystem in the region. Instead of hunting predators for sport or over-shooting, Sun Ranch management shoot strategically and conscientiously. This saves time spent on rebuilding top soils for crops or grasses and hunting predatory animals; and it saves money spent on nitrates and fertilizers, on bullets and legal proceedings. Ecologically, it preserves the land the James Stuart and his family so deeply care about for their progeny.

Another example concerns Jack Turnell, who is owner of Pitchfork Ranch in Meeteetse, Wyoming and who has been referred to as one of the most famous cowboy “eco-pioneers” (Lerner 1997, 263). In 1983, “hordes of experts, environmentalists and bureaucrats” flooded his ranch. They had found an endangered species, the black-footed ferret, still existed on his property, but would reach extinction if he continued his normal practices. At first, he reacted like many ranchers have toward environmentalists, “When the ferret was found here I had to deal with a lot of people I didn't care to deal with,” he admits. ‘I felt like I didn't need any input. I didn't want anybody messing around here. I just wanted them to stay the hell out’” (Lerner 1997, 263). Like most ranchers, he was protective of his land and his business; as other stories will corroborate, the work of well-meaning animal rights activists

does not always take the ranchers' livelihood into account. This quote illustrates why cowboys and environmentalists have found themselves at odds: they've both pursued their own goals in the past with a false stereotypical perspective on the others' position. Blinded by black-footed ferret wars, the two groups became so entrenched in their own rhetoric that they overlooked the common ground of both wanting to conserve land and health. With a history of such conflict, it was Turnell who ended up taking a new move for a cowboy thereby influencing many who came after. At first, Turnell's peers criticized him heavily. He collaborated with the environmentalists and the government. According to *Eco-Pioneers* and several Turnell supporters, "The discovery of the blackfooted ferret on Turnell's land sensitized him to environmental issues and taught him that he could negotiate a fair agreement with the authorities that would protect the ferret and permit him to run a profitable cattle operation" (Lerner 1997, 264). Much like James Stuart and myriad researchers in the field of wildlife-friendly farming and land sparing, Turnell realized he could conserve his lifestyle and the land which he knew so intimately without land expansion or monoculture crop techniques that erode soil and decimate land health. Since 1983 "he has made a serious study of environmentally sustainable ranching by experimenting on his own and consulting with experts in range management at the University of Wyoming. 'When I took over managing the Pitchfork Ranch at age twenty-six I just did things the way they had always been done,' he remembers. 'I don't think we ever managed the land all that badly, but I have learned in the last few years that we can change and do things better'" (Lerner 1997, 264). How to achieve this "better" way of doing things is an ongoing debate within sustainable agriculture discourse communities. For instance, researchers, such as Michael Jahi Chappell and colleagues in *Frontiers in Ecology and the Environment's* "Wildlife-friendly farming vs. land sparing," criticized Joern Fischer and colleagues' study of two possible practices. They claimed Fischer and colleagues suggested "land sparing (intensifying agriculture in some areas to save biodiversity elsewhere) and 'wildlife-friendly farming' (farming that integrates conservation and production)" may be unnecessary or still damage



ecosystems despite good intentions—a common fear ranchers have if they take on environmentalist ideas (2008). Fischer's response to Chappell, printed side-by-side, directly in conversation with Chappell's arguments, however, brought to light the need for conversation rather than criticism. Fischer made the definitive point that conversations about alternatives to traditional ranching and farming are necessary for the future health of our planet and food systems as: “We are on the cusp of a major shift in conservation thinking. For decades, conservation strategies have been shaped by island biogeography theory, with 'land sparing' being just one of the many offshoots of this theory. We have now reached a point where we need to work for the interdisciplinary research agenda that is urgently needed” (2009). Fischer's comments resonate deeply with the idea that ranchers need to be more like Turnell, Stuart, and cowboy poets; they need to consider multiple options for communication, farming practices, and understand how some conventional options can be considered through interdisciplinary lenses. This includes, as rain forest and agricultural researcher Nalini Nadkarni (2012) suggests: art, religion, social justice, and diverse sensibilities that affect one another continually.

Fortunately, to this point, ranchers like Turnell are becoming more prevalent and celebrated. Since he started working as a sustainability-rancher advocate, Turnell has won numerous awards, including one that created for him from the National Cattlemen's Beef Association and the National Cattlemen's Foundation: the Environmental Stewardship Award. There are still many battles between environmentalists and cowboys to come, but they are moving to the same side to fight against the many common ground issues for which they both stand for. Awards like Turnell's along with the increasing frequency of conversations around the issue illustrate how a common language is being created between the two sides.

The need to recognize the common ground between environmental organizations and ranchers highlights a common language between the two in a seemingly unlikely place: cowboy poetry. There are few careers that are so close to food production, and yet, there still exists the notion that cowboys

are among the heart of non-environmental practices.

[STATS and MAPS cut per Reviewer 1's suggestion]

There is increasing urgency to address issues of climate change, find sustainable food practices, and preserve biodiversity in order to survive. The only way to do so is to begin to collaborate across historical, political, and institutional lines. The following section seeks to explore how cowboy poetry can centralize conversations about land preservation and use. Particularly, it has the potential to increase human attachment to place, land, and food to help conceive a common language for addressing environmental issues effectively.

## **The Cowboy Rendezvous: A Common Ground, A Common Song**

Organized cowboy festivals originated in Elko, Nevada, 1985. Cowboy poets, Hal Cannon and Jim Griffith, with several other “Folklorists throughout the West scoured cattle ranches and rodeo arenas, bunkhouses and bars in search of cowboys who recited and wrote poems about the life they lived” (Miller 2009, n.p.). The result was what are now known by many names “rendezvous,” “festivals,” or simply “gatherings” throughout the West “from Pincher Creek to Pigeon Forge, Santa Clarita to San Angelo, Medora to Moab” on almost any weekend of the year (Miller 2009, n.p.). These gatherings support community-building and the performance of a lifestyle. In these performances, as Dale Major, a poet and organizer of the Hyrum Rendezvous in Northern Utah, suggested, “the traditions are passed on: the traditions of raising cattle right, harvesting solar energy, keeping our families close” (Major 2012). True to cowboy adaptability to new conditions and innovations, cattle ranchers are forging their niche anew to survive.

Through passing on sustainable traditions at cowboy music festivals, the goals of cowboys as “multiple-use conservationists” like Pinchot begin to coalesce with the “forever-wild preservationists” like Muir in performative and expansive ways (Kerasote 2005). True, as Major suggested, many small

farmers come from working class families producing a feeling that most early die-hard preservationists associated with the Sierra Club are “government yuppies” on our land. However, the literary and poetic voice is the same. The cowboy's voice comes from the land, just as Thoreau found spirituality by the lake, Whitman in the fields, Emerson in the forest. They both sing of an independent voice in harmony with others; both call for people to do their individual part through grassroots means to create lasting changes in human behavior. For instance, the Sierra Nevadan beef rancher and poet, John Dofflemyer, began publishing his poetry online and in print under the titles of *Dry Crik Review* and *Dry Creek*. On the blog, he poses a question: Why blog and write poetry about the ranching lifestyle? His answer in both prose and poetic forms gives weight to its necessity. Dofflemyer answers his question with

We are recording our activities, our improvements as well as our mistakes. Every ranch in these foothills is comprised of different landscape features and slopes, differing stock water resources, and subsequently each must be operated differently to maximize its sustainability...For to change the land use from ranch to ranchettes, to reshape the landscape with lasting impacts, is inevitably easy – but to sustain it and ourselves, harvest the grass with cattle that are converted to food for others will always be a constant, ever-changing challenge. In so doing, we leave far too many maps to our favorite fishing hole and sacrifice some privacy in order to record what we have learned by our experience – yet hopefully this blog may be of interest and of value to others beyond this canyon. (2005)

Dofflemyer encapsulates why poetry and writing about cowboys' and ranchers' attachment to the land is necessary and can build a common ground. In short, art builds a bridge between different lifestyles. In this case, art draws a line of communication between ranchers and non-ranchers, multiple-use landowners and preservationists.

The commonality of such sustainable practices is found all over the United States. Many modern cowboys have realized that these practices not only save money, but also give a means to contend with corporate meat producers. For instance, small ranchers are becoming more supportive of Farmer's Markets, as can be seen at Cowboy Rendezvous and gatherings throughout the country (Gale 1997; Martinez, et al. 2010; Sayre 2006). Farmers markets encourage local agriculture and small-scale

meat production, and between 1994 and 2012, the number of US farmer's markets has more than quadrupled, from 1,755 to 7,864 (USDA 2012). Akin to Cowboy Rendezvous, Farmer's Markets are participatory performances that encourage the re-establishment of sustainable traditions. As Evelyn Funda writes in her memoir, *Weeds: A Farm Daughter's Lament*, "Farmers' markets are, write Jennifer Meta Robinson and J.A. Hartenfeld, a 'living performance' where we build community and play out a 'desire...for a sense of authenticity and locality'" (2012, 10). They, like the singing circles and cowboy music festivals, connect us to one another. Grocery stores, lonesome in their disconnect, do not allow personal interaction. They render the relationships between field and farmer, farmer and customer, and customer and food virtually non-existent. Thus, it is in coming together to support small farming operations that more sustainable practices will appear. In musical terms, it will keep the round going, echoing in our minds, tuning into the harmony between one another, our bodies, the land, and the food we ingest.

In John Dofflemeyer's poetry, for example, he stresses the intense connection between farmer and land that most of us non-farmers and ranchers miss out on in our trips to the grocery store. His poem, "The Good and Bad," provides a particularly strong connection between farmer, land, and the characteristic of resilience in both. He writes,

We draw lines, sort  
the good and bad  
like fruit that won't last  
forever. It's how we are  
with new things  
that don't quite fit  
what we remember  
of the old ways  
marked by seasons,  
never one the same.

All the dust and dirt  
in '77, the leppy wanderings  
when it could not rain,  
hillsides solid gold

in the warm wet spring  
of '78—we survived them.

But hard to say, today  
what resilient beauty waits—  
how the bad fruit rots  
and its seed takes hold  
to make a generous tree. (2012)

Though Dofflemyer's earlier statement characterizes the ranching life as “mundane,” his poetry lifts his lifestyle to a common plane that all can access comfortably. All humans know a sense of endurance, survival, resilience, and can connect with the idea that from death, especially in terms of bad fruit becoming compost, life can spring anew. The images, though simple, are beautiful, deeply penetrating, and cross the boundaries of ranching and non-ranching culture. In this poem and others, one can begin to see the cowboy as a steward rather than conqueror, a caretaker of the land who provides the rest of humankind with food rather than an overgrazing, anti-environmentalist.

This demystifying poetic voice of the cowboy can be found in the songs of cowboy as well, especially when pertaining to particular bioregions. Songs often reflect upon specific places that are attached to a cowboy's memory and thus a deep part of himself. For instance, in the song, “Blue Mountain,” recorded in *Cowboy Songs* (songwriter and specific date not recorded), the lyrics sing,

My home it was in Texas  
My past you must not know  
I seek a refuge from the law  
Where the sage and pinyon grow

(CHORUS)

Blue Mountain, you're azure deep  
Blue Mountain with sides so steep  
Blue Mountain with horse head on your side  
You have won my heart to keep.

The cowboy is not a heartless, uncaring individual. In contrast, he personifies the land almost like a lover, it has “won my heart” with its deep blue hills, sage, and sense of refuge. One can see how cowboys would be motivated to conserve the beauty of a land they know so well. They may be

stereotyped in the media, but as these poems and their rendezvous prove, they want the earth to survive them just as much as preservationists do.

In the context of the actual performances of these poems, one finds that the words have become reality. At Hyrum Rendezvous, for instance, organizers promoted grass-fed cattle, diminishing overgrazing, use of compostable products, on-farm renewable energy production, and maintaining a sustainable relationship with wildlife to encourage more cowboys to adopt the same ideals (Major personal communication 2012). This can be seen most readily through a trend toward more sustainable practices on farms throughout the country. For instance, in 2009, the Census of Agriculture conducted a survey that gathered information on alternative energy production such as wind turbines, solar panels, and methane digesters. Producers on 8,569 farms in the United States reported producing renewable energy on their operations in 2009. Farmers whose operations produced on-farm energy saved an average of \$2,406 on their utility bills in 2009 (USDA 2009). The collective song built at cowboy festivals allows these practices to be further encouraged through entertainment and community-building.

Although organized festivals like the Hyrum Rendezvous mostly draw local crowds, their reach is also at times national, even global. On the national scale, roughly 50 years prior to the 1985 festival in Elko, President Theodore Roosevelt took part in preserving the cowboy way of life, physically and artistically (National Park Service, 2004). Though the president was known for creating the “Rough Riders,” Roosevelt was not originally a cowboy. Economically, he was far more affluent, choosing the cowboy lifestyle when he felt it fitting. Intellectually, he read and spoke in the sentimental tradition often associated with privileged groups (Tompkins, 1992). However, establishing himself as a vicarious cowboy and sought to preserve cowboy poetry with the help of John Lomax. He commissioned Lomax to record and ride around the West gathering cowboy poetry and songs (National Park Service, 2004). Lomax's work was then compiled into his book, *Cowboy Songs*, with the support of the Library of

Congress. Roosevelt and Lomax were thus two of the first to bridge the Jane Tompkins' hardy, laconic, and lone Western man and the political sphere effectively. He made it a mission to conserve the West the way Lewis and Clark first saw it; and cowboys, especially the poets, still tout his name.

Continuing the tradition of Roosevelt, Lomax's, and Muir's collaborative that brought the world the United States' National Park System and have preserved famous cowboy songs, contemporary cattle ranchers perform to preserve, singing and saluting sustainability both of traditions and modern innovations.

## **The Future: Building Upon The Common Language with Community-Based Social Marketing**

Cowboy music festivals are an effective step of many in creating a common language between cattle ranching entertainers, sustainable land-use practitioners, preservationists, and conservationists. As discussed, in providing a medium that is both entertainment and edifying, cowboy festivals have the great potential to reach beyond the farm fields into arenas where non-ranchers can support their work and environmentalists can begin to collaborate with small ranchers to meet common goals.

After almost thirty years of success, festivals are becoming more of a norm in towns across the United States. Their growth has even extended into the Canadian West (Western Folklife Center 2011). There is still much to be done, however, in making cowboy music festival attendance a norm for ranchers and non-ranchers. In Doug McKenzie-Mohr's *Fostering Sustainable Behavior*, the key to creating long-term and widespread changes in sustainable behavior, the ideas must “pay adequate attention to the *human* side of promoting more sustainable energy use” (2011, 7). Cowboy performers do indeed build on this human component. They are welcoming to non-ranchers, encourage youth engagement through Youth Poetry Contests, and involve local vendors and restaurants as much as possible (Western Folklife Center 2011). In effect, they engage several types of people to create a

community around common interests in art and, in the case of cowboy rendezvous, the freedom and beauty of the American West. Stanford professor, John Felstiner, supports this idea, he writes, “poems touch our full humanness...they quicken awareness and bolster respect for this ravaged resilient earth we live on” (Felstiner 2009, n.p.). For instance, one can see this in the famed songwriter's Roger McGuinn's “Brazos River Song.” McGuinn sings of the attachment to land as it relates to love, memories, freedom, and beauty. The song lyrics include,

The cool Angelina runs lofty and gliding  
 The crooked Colorado runs weaving and winding  
 The Red River runs rusty, the Wichita clear  
 But Down by the Brazos, I courted my dear

I la lie lee lee give me your hand  
 I la lie lee lee give me your hand  
 I la lie lee lee give me your hand  
 There's many a river that waters the land (Treasures from the Folk Den 2001)

The majority of cowboy poems have a connection to the ranch land, the animals cowboys raise, the beauty of the surrounding land and how ranching attaches one to the land in ways beyond conservation battles. The poems and songs create a sense of place that can affect sustainable behavior in a more complex way than economic incentives. McKenzie-Mohr continues, “While the economic perspective does consider the human side of sustainable behavior, it does so in a very simplistic way” (2011, 7). Art and music on the other hand addresses human values, “the rich mixture of cultural practices, social interactions, and human feelings that influence the behavior of individuals, social groups, and institutions” (in McKenzie-Mohr 2011, 7).

McKenzie-Mohr (2011) suggests increasing benefits and decreasing barriers to increase the likelihood of sustainable behaviors. In terms of cowboy poetry, the festivals encourage sustainable behaviors on two levels. On one level, cowboy poetry would help to spread sustainable ranching efforts because it *is* a benefit. The festivals are entertaining, pleasurable, maintain traditions, and move people to pass on traditions to their families. Further, at cowboy festivals, many will find sustainable, local



products sold or given away. Attendees that use sustainable practices on their farms or in their homes will find they are the norm among other ranchers. McKenzie-Mohr refers to this second step toward behavioral change, “[a change] in self-perception...Self-Perception Theory intriguingly suggests that if we can provide opportunities for people to engage in sustainable behaviors conveniently, the very act of engaging in those behaviors will shape their attitudes” (2011, 47). Thus, attendees will find others sustainable practitioners like them or find ways to practice sustainability conveniently increasing the likelihood that they will continue to use the behavior feeling it is a social norm and, thus, more likely to pass those practices on to future generations.

The final problem, then, is to demystify the idea that attending cowboy festivals, listening to cowboy poetry, music, and entertainment, and, most importantly, finding common ground with cattle ranchers is impossible or abnormal for environmentalists. A good place to begin to break down this mental barrier is at Farmer's Markets, Slow Food events, and other environmentally-friendly activities each year. At these festivals, the modern cowboy is also increasingly present. Finding and creating common ground places where sustainable ranching practices can be promoted as the norm can be achieved through collaborative efforts. Preservationists and multiple-use conservationists will find their goals are the same. Economic, environmental, and social stewardship is a commonly held desire. As of right now, these places must be expanded. A common ground exists and has existed throughout the history of ranching. This common ground can continue to grow through arenas celebrating sustainability in ranching via beauty, historical knowledge, cultural changes, and art.

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